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ABSTRACT

The Department of Developmental Education (DDE) at Peirce Junior College (PJC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, serves a student population that is 56% minority, 85% first-generation college students, and 80% academically underprepared. In an effort to improve academic and counseling services to PJC's educationally disadvantaged students, a tutorial center was established as an integral part of the DDE, combining academic advising, tutoring, and non-academic counseling. To ensure use of the center, all students placed into developmental courses were required to receive 10 or more tutorials at the center. The new tutoring center extended services to groups previously unable to receive tutoring at PJC, including foreign students and students enrolled in evening and Saturday classes. The DDE also made improvements in the instruments and systems used for testing and placement of students in remedial writing and mathematics courses, and helped develop standardized syllabi for developmental courses. Using pre- and post-tests, as well as grades, a group of students were tracked to determine the impact of using the new tutorial center. Developmental students who received grades of "A" had visited the tutorial center an average of 4.27 times, compared to students receiving grades of "C," who averaged only 1.37 tutorials. In the 1992-93 academic year, over 49% of the student body at PJC utilized tutoring services, compared with only 9% for the previous year. To ensure joint ownership of the program, developmental instructors attended monthly meetings and participated in discussions regarding the selection of texts and grading systems to be used. (PAA)

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Creating a Multicomponent Tutorial Center, Cross-training of Faculty, and Upgrading the Developmental Program at a Two Year Private Business College

Submitted
by

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Creating a Multicomponent Tutorial Center, Cross-training of Faculty, and Upgrading the Developmental Program at a Two Year Private Business College

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ABSTRACT

Peirce has developed a Department of Developmental Education and an integral part of the program is the tutorial center. This development was a bold act for Peirce--an effort to incorporate current pedagogy into an out of date curriculum, and an attempt to create a user friendly and collegiate environment within which students can thrive. Peirce provided tutorial services within a multi-component student support center which also includes non-academic counseling. Individual and group tutorials are an integral part of redesigned developmental courses. Our challenges included reaching resistant faculty and staff, and the providing of services to a population which includes 56% minorities, 85% first generation college students, and 80% of students who are academically underprepared. Our goals were to raise the awareness of and to retrain experienced faculty and to create and environment conducive to both collaborative learning and individual development. We discovered that students who

availed themselves of the services offered improved more on departmental finals. In the second semester of existence, the tutorial center had an even higher degree of success because faculty cooperation and enthusiasm increased.

The Need for Change

Peirce Junior College, founded in 1865, offers two year vocational and business related degrees. Among degrees offered are Court Reporting, Business Administration, Paralegal, and Business Transfer. Peirce promises practical skills that will allow students quick access into a variety of fields.

The developmental education department was seen as necessary because most students at Peirce require remediation. Eighty percent of students require one or more remedial course. This need had not been met previously in a consistent manner. While there were non-academic student support services which offered tutoring, the service was not available to non-members of the programs. In the 1991-92 academic year only 98 students out of 1133 students (717 day students, and 416 evening students) were tutored in developmental course work at Peirce.

More students needed to be remediated effectively at Peirce because the students were from categories that traditionally require remediation. The student body consists of a high percentage of returning students, women, and minorities. Most attended high school in the metropolitan Philadelphia area. They are both academically underprepared and economically

disadvantaged. The connection between these two factors has been well documented.

Internal retention figures were weak, especially for students placing into developmental courses. 40% of all students who enrolled in 1991 had returned in 1992.

Another problem was that teaching of developmental courses was not standardized. In mathematics, some faculty used the traditional lecture approach, while others attempted to use a competency based individualized approach. Communication between faculty members was minimal regarding this, despite the fact that the competencies being taught were supposed to be identical. We could not compare the success of the teaching styles because standardized finals were not administered. In the developmental English course, instructors usually taught only mechanics, and administered a series of quizzes and exercises out of textbooks written for the secondary market. It was no surprise that these students often were still underprepared for college level classes. Though lively and instructive debate continues to take place regarding how to teach grammar effectively, influential studies show that a more holistic approach works better and that teaching grammar in the formal traditional manner has a negligible impact on effective learning (Hartwell 106). It was determined that the Reading and Study Skills course did not in fact emphasize the study skills component that the courses title suggests. The texts and methods of faculty did not take into account recent research on how to develop critical thinking

skills and the nature of different learning styles.

Finally, record-keeping was not adequate. The developmental department would now keep precise records of grades, pre and post-tests, tutorial visits, and curriculum development meetings. This would enable us to draw conclusions regarding the impact of changes on student performance and retention.

Creating a Developmental Department

Members of the developmental education department, directors of student support services have the mission of providing students with the basic skills necessary for academic success. Because the tutorial services offered here in the past were practically non-existent, our administration gave us freedom to experiment with the methods that would be most appropriate for our population. The center was also seen as a vital component in the implementation of curricular changes in developmental courses. Students placing into new or revamped courses were required to log in ten or more visits to the tutorial center. Simultaneously, we were faced with the challenge of working with a faculty that was highly resistant to change. One reason they resisted change was that they had been left out of the decision making process. Personal and frequent communication with faculty teaching developmental courses is being attempted so that faculty would share ownership with the education specialists in the development of remedial courses.

The following narrative and observations occurred in the

context of a new facility which combined student support services. The complex combined academic advising, tutoring, and non-academic counseling in the same environment in an effort to make the services easily available and non-threatening. These integrated services are seen at Peirce as a vital new retention method.

Integration of New Services in Learning Resource Center

Because there had never been significant tutorial services at Peirce, we spent much time in outreach to both faculty and students. Previous to this year most tutoring offered was limited to members of student support services (Title IV and Act 101) Students perceived the services as available only to program members, which, in fact, they were. International students in particular were not tutored because the programs were specifically directed to offer services to United States citizens. We had to publicize and emphasize to faculty that the College Administration had provided for all students to be serviced within the new center through the addition of a Department of Developmental Education whose mission was in part to create a tutorial center. Funded through grants of the existing student support programs, a Perkins grant specific to helping remedial students, as well as through the College itself, tutoring became available for all students. Previously, tutors and specialists were not available to help students enrolled in evening and Saturday classes; now they were.

Faculty were dubious that the new programs would be adequate because in previous years students had in fact not been well served. Many had been turned away because they were not members of the programs described. Some faculty were also hesitant to encourage students to use the services because they were of the opinion that students ought not to require remedial or tutorial services. Despite the fact that they were teaching at a two year institution with relatively low admissions standards, some experienced faculty see developmental classes as a litmus test for students' college preparedness and viability. In the first semester of service, many developmental staff did not cooperate by requiring that all students obtain tutorials. These faculty provided us with an excellent control group of students with which to compare the performance of students.

Cooperation with Non-Academic Support Services

Participation in other student support services became easily accessible to students because of the shared space. Attempts were made to integrate esteem building and other skills emphasized in non-academic counseling into the developmental program.

Placement and Tracking Instruments

We tracked the progress of students using pre and post-tests and grades. We also examined the impact of services directly on retention; that is, did services play a primary role in impacting

whether or not a student stayed in school. To ensure that students used the center we required that all students who placed into a developmental course receive 10 or more tutorials at the tutorial center.

For pre- and post-tests, an instrument developed in 1983 was used. It was the only instrument the college had been using, therefore, we continued to use it. Students were placed into courses using arbitrary cutoffs. No national norms were considered.

For writing skills, we have instituted a qualitative essay test, in which the student must produce an argumentative essay of 350 to 500 words. This instrument is similar to placement and exit exams used at many colleges and universities, including the CUNY system and Temple University in Philadelphia, institutions that remediated effectively. This test is read by two trained readers, and a combined score is used to determine whether or not the student requires remediation. If the readers disagree, a third reader makes reads the essay and makes a verdict on the score and placement. Using this test has enabled us to overcome the pitfalls of using only a quantitative examination to test writing skills.

The algebra section of the test is not acceptable because it does not coincide with the Peirce curriculum. Ten questions in the algebra section are not addressed in the course. Since the cutoff for "passing" is 12, and there are 25 questions, the chances of a student getting a higher score, even a student who

has done well in the course, is drastically reduced. Also, there are 3 levels of algebra, and these levels were not being used practically. Students could opt to take whichever level they wished. If they chose the more difficult test and performed poorly, they had to take a remedial course. If they chose the most elementary level, and performed well, they sometimes passed out. Clearly, some students who didn't need remediation in elementary algebra were penalized by being required to take the elementary algebra course. (See appendix for explanation of placement and cutoffs). Clearly, there had to be more standardized correlation between testing and needs assessment.

The developmental team has made several innovations immediately to offset possible invalid tests. Pre-tests are given the first day of developmental classes to allow students to be exempted from the course if they had been improperly placed. Non-native speakers of English are allowed to take untimed pre-tests in mathematics. This helped to alleviate the problem of potentially invalid placement testing, however, more extensive curricular changes were necessary to bring developmental courses up to date.

Curricular Changes

The new standardized syllabi facilitated easily the kinds of classroom activities that Kurfiss recommends for the enhancement of critical thinking skills (1992), activities that encourage controversy and debate, student to student dialogue, and informal

as well a: formal writing assignments. Interdisciplinary assignments were written and put at the disposal of faculty. These assignments deemphasized that one solution exists for each problem, many asked students to take what they knew and apply it to a hypothetical situation. At the end of each semester we looked at the relation between the number of tutorials on improvement in these instruments, as well as on final grades.

We tried to personalize the services offered in order to attract more students in particular areas. Because many of the degrees offered are vocational, the tutorial and workshops available were designed to help students in particular areas. For example, a grammar workshop was designed for students of court reporting. The workshop met four times for 90 minutes. Faculty in the court reporting department were supportive and appreciative of this workshop. We assured them that the material covered would be practical and that we would draw examples from legal writings and court proceedings. Some students who availed themselves of this workshop were enrolled in developmental classes. Those who were not enrolled had been previously. This workshop, therefore, clearly served the purpose of remediation.

Improvements in Retention

An average of 518 out of 792, or 65.4% students received a grade of "C" or higher in developmental courses during the academic year. Of those who did not receive a "C" or higher, 16% received a "D" or an "F." 2.6% received and "I," which stands

for incomplete. The remaining 14.5% of the students withdrew from the course.

Overall, developmental students who utilized the tutorial center achieved higher grades. Students who received a grade of "A" visited an average of 4.27 times. Students who received a "B" attended on an average of 3.69 times. And students who received a "C" received an average of 1.37 tutorials.

We must remember, however, not to measure success solely by grades. A student in basic mathematics who visited 4 times and received a "C" for the course may have received a lower grade in the absence of tutorials. While a higher percentage of students completed remedial coursework in their first year at Peirce, we will not know specific percentages that will graduate until next year.

The impact was also pronounced in non-developmental areas. There were 1628 visits to the center in the fall of 1992. 533 were for courses other than developmental courses, accounting for 36% of overall visits. The remaining tutorials were in developmental coursework.

Overall, a total of 3011 tutorials were given to students in the 1992-93 academic year. which translates into over 49% of the entire student body. Out of this total 2034 tutorials or 68% were for developmental coursework.

In stark contrast, only 98 students received tutorials in the previous academic year--only 9% of the student body.

The reason for the overall increase in tutoring is not just

that more funding was available. Approximately the same amount of funding was appropriated for tutoring. The increase is the result of many improvements: (1) students in developmental classes were required to visit the center as part of revised and standardized developmental curriculum, (2) educational specialists trained tutors and managed the tutorial center, (3) the tutorial center was opened in the evenings and on Saturdays, (4) funding was appropriated such that more students were eligible to receive tutoring, (5) the area was expanded and redesigned to accommodate small group and individual instruction, as well as to include nonacademic support services and advising services.

We were able to service more evening students by extending the tutorial center's hours of operation. 5 to 10% of total visits occurred after 5 p.m. on weekdays, or during Saturday hours. We measured these percentages by examining the logs kept by tutors. The reason the percentage is not precise is that sometimes it was unclear whether the student was tutored after five p.m.

Ensuring Joint Ownership of Program

In order to ensure joint ownership of the program, monthly meetings were set up and were attended by all developmental instructors. Meetings of the mathematics, writing, and reading components met every other week in order to compare class plans and to discuss problems that may have arisen in the class.

Instructors participated in decisions regarding the choosing of texts and of the system of grading used for the course.

Results of our analysis of grades and post-tests showed us that we needed to communicate with faculty exactly what competencies were expected of the student in each class. We sought to justify changes by demonstrating that they were pedagogically sound. Internal statistics regarding the impact of tutorial services on student performance on post-tests and grades were shared. Specialists wrote a policy statement for their area and asked instructors to contribute to the process. The resulting policy was approved by the Associate Academic Dean. Adjuncts, as part of their orientation, were familiarized with the policy statement.

Because of the addition of some programs and the phasing out of others, some faculty members at Peirce were interested in moving into a new area for them: developmental education. We set up a training and team-teaching program to support these faculty. Elements of cross-training included observations of classes taught by experienced faculty, observations by experienced teachers, and team teaching. Team teaching included frequent meetings with the faculty person. The specialist assisted the non-specialist in planning of classes grading. Teachers also tutored in the Center and attended or led workshops. Specialists and new developmental met frequently to discuss methods, materials, and specific problems.

Summary and Recommendations

Competency levels, or modules, have been, or are being designed for developmental classes. Standardized post-tests and finals will be used to ensure that students achieve the required competencies. To ensure joint ownership of the program, a committee of developmental faculty will design the competencies. Input from representatives of non-academic programs was asked for.

Efforts were made to include the services of counselors in the remedial program. For example, counselors visited the "Reading and Study Skills" course to talk about Esteem Building and to inform students of services available at Peirce. Such services include communication workshops and single parenting workshops.

Workshops designed for students in particular courses of study helped to continue to remediate students above the required courses or following the completion of the coursework. Continued remediation or review of basic skills is important for court reporting, paralegal, and business transfer students whose reading, mathematics, and writing skills must be first-rate.

Efforts were also made to make developmental coursework interdisciplinary. A packet of readings was used for both reading and writing courses. The readings emphasized issues relevant to the students we serve: single parenting, learning styles, secondary education in the United States, popular culture and so on.

Mathematics faculty included writing assignments in their coursework. The assignments asked the students to consider the usefulness of mathematic principles in every day life and in the work place. English instructors sometimes graded the assignments for a grade in the English course.

Forms were designed that made it easy to access the following information: number of students tutored, number of tutorials given by specific tutors, number of students in special programs that were tutored, grades of students according to section or program. Grant agencies could be assured that the appropriate students were being served.

We hope our discussions with staff and faculty, and our assessment of the data we have compiled will help us to make changes to reach an even higher percentage of students in the future. This will result in even better attendance of tutorial programs and student support services in the upcoming academic year. We hope it encourages faculty to value the efforts of these programs so that they will more readily refer students to them. Studies consistently show that such intrusive strategies and personal attention enhance a students college experience, that they in fact succeed in helping to retain students. (Levitz and Noell, 1985).

Two year colleges that face declining enrollments, and that includes most two year private institutions such as Peirce, must provide adequate remedial services if they are to survive. Our experience shows that not only should such services not be cut,

as administration is apt to do with "extraneous" services, they can in fact be made an integral part of the developmental and nondevelopmental coursework. It can provide the services so that faculty teaching upper level courses need not lower their standards. Simultaneously, students develop thinking and communication skills that will prove invaluable in the workforce.

Each of the many changes we have implemented, if viewed alone, might make little impact on a college. But viewed together, it is conceivable that the changes have largely helped to create a positive, collegiate, and accessible environment for students. This, along with the revamped developmental department is certainly a sign that even a vocational college with an ingrained and arguably obscelete tradition can adapt to changing student demographics. The challenge is to continue to support these endeavors, to realize that the institution *need not lower academic standards* in order to accommodate vocational constituencies. Such lowering of standards would ultimately result in the reduction in the value of a conferred degree.

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